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ABSTRACT

This digest offers guidelines for group advocacy efforts on behalf of gifted education. Four potential pitfalls are identified: using an adversarial rather than a persuasive approach; assuming that people in administrative and political positions are not too bright or not very knowledgeable--or both; being impatient; and ineffectively coping with intragroup tensions. In contrast, effective advocay involves four basic phases: needs assessment; planning; contact; and follow up and evaluation. Eleven guidelines for establishing and maintaining a successful parent advocacy group are suggested and include: focus on a mission and a sense of purpose; include not only parents but also business leaders and school professionals; contact the state advocacy group; adopt a constitution that spells out the organization's goals; identify and respect the group that holds the power; allow professionals to develop the program; conduct short- and long-term evaluation of the advocacy process; and be an informed advocate. (DB)

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SUPPORTING GIFTED EDUCATION THROUGH ADVOCACY

Effective nurturing of giftedness in children and adolescents requires a cooperative partnership between home and school, one that is characterized by mutual respect and an ongoing sharing of ideas and observations about the children involved. To accomplish this partnership, parents and educators must know something about giftedness, understand the children's needs, and understand some basic principles of advocacy.

Parents and educators should understand how to be effective advocates because recognition that *all* gifted children require programs specifically tailored to their unique learning requirements requires responsible action. If a child's needs are not being met by a program, an appropriate starting point is a friendly conversation with the child's teacher. *Your Gifted Child* (1989) provides practical suggestions on individual advocacy. If the problem involves many children, such as might be the case when there is a need for program development or expansion, a unified group voicing shared concerns is far more effective than the complaints of one or two people. Advocacy groups also provide mutual support and share problem-solving strategies.

Effective group advocacy requires individuals to be knowledgeable, organize, define goals and objectives, understand the organization and structure of the local school system, use existing local and state systems, be committed, and be persistent and patient. Joining or establishing a parent group is a good place to start. Investigate groups such as your local Parent Teacher Association to find out whether or not there are others who share your concerns. Contact your State Department of Education Coordinator for Gifted Programs and ask how to get in touch with your state advocacy group.

Some cautionary advice is also in order for individuals concerned with becoming effective advocates. Patricia Bruce Mitchell provides a sensible approach to group advocacy in the following excerpt from *An Advocate's Guide to Building Support for Gifted and Talented Education.*

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Understanding the Process and Avoiding the Pitfalls*

The term *advocate* originates from the Latin word for *legal counselor.* It means one who pleads in favor of, supports by argument, defends or vindicates. Thus, we consciously (and sometimes unconsciously) become advocates of the things we truly believe in and want to see develop and improve.

To best explain the concept of advocacy, we will begin with some of the wrong approaches, then move to a suggested process for using your drive and abilities to achieve success as an advocate.

Pitfall #1: Using an Adversarial Rather Than a Persuasive Approach

There is a natural tendency for us to model our behavior after the advocates for the rights of minorities and students with handicaps. They were successful, so we feel that if we do the same thing we will also reap big rewards for the children we represent. Unfortunately this line of reasoning will not work. Those other advocates were adept in various pressure tactics, but these tactics will not work as well for advocates of gifted students for three reasons:

1. The cause is different. The basic rights of children with handicaps and children from minority backgrounds were violated when they were systematically segregated from others. This inequity created a basis for guilt among those responsible for the segregation. Guilt makes us more responsive to pressure tactics. Unfortunately, few people feel guilty about doing something extra for children who have outstanding abilities, and it cannot be contended that gifted and talented children are being denied access to an education. Even though they may be bored and unhappy, they are still in school.
2. Times have changed. Everyone has learned to be more assertive as pressure tactics have be-

* Adapted from "Understanding the Process and Avoiding the Pitfalls," by P. B. Mitchell, by permission of the author.

come a part of everyday interactions. Thus, pressure no longer provides the high visibility for a cause that it once did.

3. We are wiser. We have learned a lot from the 1960s and 1970s. Legal proceedings can take years to complete. Even when the cause has been won, or a mandate incorporated into law, it will be a long time before state and local systems can implement the letter, much less the spirit, of the ruling. We are finally realizing that change is not an event; it is an evolutionary process.

In summary, "winning through intimidation" may work beautifully with hotel clerks who lose confirmed reservations, but it frequently backfires when trying to apply it to decision makers. The better approach would be to model yourself after a good salesperson. It may not be as inspiring as the "march into battle" adversarial approach, but it is more likely to be effective.

Pitfall #2: Assuming That People in Administrative and Political Positions Are Not Too Bright or Not Very Knowledgeable—or Both.

It is amazing to see advocates in action who are displaying obvious contempt for the legislators, board members, or administrators with whom they are dealing. Perhaps this occurs because of a disrespect for politicians or because the advocates feel that their superior knowledge of the subject at hand puts them in a superior position. Such attitudes and actions are destructive to any cause. They are particularly deadly if the advocate is speaking on behalf of gifted students. Even the words *gifted*, *talented*, or *exceptionally able* evoke fear of elitism.

Pitfall # 3: Being Impatient

It is tough to be patient when you see children whose abilities need attention and development *right now*. But patience in advocacy for gifted and talented students is more than a virtue, it is a requirement. Good program development takes time.

Pitfall #4: Being Human

Perhaps the toughest challenge you will face as an advocate for students who are gifted and talented will not be to testify before a legislative committee but to manage to get a group of fellow advocates to work together. Cooperative advocacy is essential, but advocates are human beings who may not feel that they have been given adequate input into or control over an advocacy effort such as seeking school board approval for a program. Such feelings may lead to undermining group efforts. It will take a chorus of committed persons to get the support needed for top quality programs for every gifted and talented child. Getting that chorus together will require a lot of effort and selflessness so that no one voice rises above the others.

Channeling Your Energies in the Right Direction Through Systematic Advocacy

Now that you have thought about what *not* to do, let us look at a process that can make your efforts more systematic and more successful. The process consists of the four basic phases summarized here. For more detailed information and a thorough discussion of each phase, consult *An Advocate's Guide to Building Support for Gifted and Talented Education* (Mitchell, 1981).

1. *Needs Assessment.* Find out what *is* currently going on for gifted and talented students in your district, and then determine what *should* happen. The discrepancy between the two defines what your needs are. The next step is to make a "political" assessment: Find out who is supportive, who is not supportive, who is undecided about improving programs for gifted and talented children, and what they will accept. A thorough assessment takes a lot of time, but it will pay much greater dividends than any other time investment.
2. *Planning.* Map out what you want to happen, how you will present your request, and how you will get the votes needed for approval. The plan should provide enough detail so that everyone understands what is to be done, who is responsible, and how and when it will be accomplished.
3. *Contact.* Present your request to the decision makers whose approval is essential. There are many ways that you can make informal and formal contact with decision makers and communicate your concerns for gifted and talented children. Lay the groundwork by finding ways to make contact in informal settings. Use informal contacts such as social functions or student awards ceremonies as a way to build support throughout the year, but particularly in the months preceding a formal request. Making a presentation or writing a letter to the board of education, the legislature, or one of their committees are examples of formal contact. Extensive preparation and rehearsal are essential.
4. *Follow-up and Evaluation.* Conduct a "postmortem" on your effects to determine what to do and what not to do next time. This phase usually merges into the needs assessment of the next advocacy effort, so the process is a continuous cycle.

It takes a lot of stamina to give your best energy and ideas to all four phases. The temptation is to focus on the contact, with some quick planning just before but little or no needs assessment or follow-up. Resist the temptation. It is essential to carry out the necessary activities in all four phases.

Establishing and Maintaining a Successful Parent Advocacy Group

If you want your school district to start or expand a program for gifted students, organization is the key to effective advocacy. The following guidelines, distilled from resources listed at the end of this article, may be helpful:

1. Focus on a mission and a sense of purpose. Your organization must be clear about its long-term goals and objectives and be able to describe them clearly to others. "Helping gifted children" sounds good, but is far too broad to hold your group together when you face the inevitable constraints and problems.
2. Pick a place and call a meeting of not only interested parents, but also business leaders, and school professionals. At some future time, they might be your strongest allies, since they are concerned about the quality of local education and the graduates they hire. Invite an outside expert to give a brief overview of gifted education, the need for differentiated education, and the components of effective programs. Remember, not all programs for gifted students are effective. Decide on a name for the group, bearing in mind that the dispute over using the word *gifted* can take minutes, hours, or months to resolve. Leave at least a half hour for questions and comments. People need to feel involved!
3. Establish your steering committee. If, at the end of the first meeting, you have five committed people, you have achieved success. Decide what you want to accomplish and the frequency of meetings. Most boards meet at least once a month, and the members speak to one another frequently between meetings.
4. Contact your state advocacy group. Ask whether they have a constitution and by-laws and whether a ready-made network exists in your state. If so, affiliation may be beneficial.
5. Adopt a constitution that spells out the goals of the organization and the mechanics of its operation. Get sample copies of by-laws from other groups, and design your own to fit local conditions. Keep them simple. Aims and purposes should be listed in Articles of Organization. These can include, for example, "to provide information and to be generally helpful to parents of gifted children; to educate the public and to promote understanding in the community of the educational needs of gifted children; to act as a center for the exchange of ideas with other groups interested in education for the gifted; and to cooperate with such organizations in promoting educational opportunities for gifted children." Goals should be accompanied by measurable objectives and should answer the question, "What do I want to happen?"

   In addition to by-laws, you will need written policies and procedures for conducting group business, descriptions of the purposes of all standing committees, and job descriptions for all positions. Agree on specific services your group can offer the community and how those services might be provided. For example, you might agree to inform parents on meeting the social and emotional needs of gifted children by identifying a speaker and holding a public meeting. Be sure to consider any negative consequences. One group placed a meeting notice in the local newspaper and later discovered that they had created a groundswell both for and against their goals and objectives.
6. Identify and respect the group that holds the power. School board members and state legislators are busy people who may be neutral or supportive of the idea of special programs for gifted children but simply not know enough about the subject. Initial contacts should be used to provide information on student needs in your district. Your message should be direct and concise, and it should answer specific questions that the decision-maker wants answered. Inform yourself about your district's budget cycle. Distant goals require at least 2 years of advance planning.
7. Allow professionals to develop the program. Be careful to remain in your role as advocate. Your job is to help establish and maintain a system so that they can work more effectively in their roles as administrators, curriculum specialists, and teachers. One well-established parent group, with the support of curriculum specialists, used its resources to design and conduct a county-wide secondary school needs assessment. The information was given to school officials along with a written request that the district assign a parent/student/professional task force to develop a program. The task force studied the parent report, investigated possible ways to meet the needs of gifted adolescents, and eventually submitted a report to the school board. This cooper-

ative venture resulted in a pilot program several years later. By the time the pilot program was put in place, everyone—parents, students, teachers, administrators—felt responsible for its ultimate success.

8. Conduct short- and long-term evaluation of the advocacy process. Your organization can strengthen and grow if it evaluates everything it does in terms of goals and objectives and then acts on the results.
9. Provide reinforcement for group members. Successful advocacy groups for gifted children, like most organizations, function primarily with volunteer help. Praise and recognition for volunteers is essential.
10. Be an informed advocate. A healthy advocacy organization grows and changes with the evolution of what is learned about gifted children, their special needs, and effective political processes. To maintain credibility and assist community members, an organization should be informed about national, state, and regional trends in gifted education, including operational definitions of the term *gifted*. The organization also must establish informal or formal relationships with local, state, and national levels of government and other organizations. Learn to work cooperatively with consultants, legislators, state education groups, other advocacy groups both within the state and beyond. Effective advocacy can be boiled down to positive use of accurate information by a large number of people.
11. Enjoy the people you meet, the friends you make, and the satisfaction derived from your efforts on behalf of gifted children.

Resources

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Resources on Advocacy

The following groups provide valuable information and assistance to parent-advocates who want to play a significant role in their children's education:

National Committee for Citizens in Education (NCCE), ACCESS Clearinghouse, 10840 Little Patuxent Parkway, Suite 301, Columbia, MD 21044, 301/997-9300 or 800/NETWORK (638-9675). A not-for-profit organization devoted to improving the quality of public schools through increased public involvement, NCCE maintains a computerized database and provides information and resources to parents and other citizens. NCCE also trains parents and educators to work constructively together, provides handbooks and films, monitors federal legislation, provides technical assistance, and publishes a monthly newspaper.

Institute for Responsive Education (IRE), 605 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA 02215. IRE's publications list includes many helpful books and pamphlets on community participation in education.

Children's Defense Fund (CDF), 122 C Street, NW, Washington, DC 20001. Write or call for a publications list. CDF's advocacy for the children of America is very effective; its publications are excellent resources. Especially recommended is *It's Time to Stand Up for Your Children: A Parent's Guide to Child Advocacy*.

Prepared by Sandra L. Berger, past president of a parent advocacy association and author of *College Planning for Gifted Students*.

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